

*The formula is well-known,
now we need to follow it*

By MIKE SCHMOKER

Some schools, despite demographic disadvantages and a history of low achievement, can and do improve. Entire school districts, including those with large disadvantaged populations, have improved significantly — and fairly quickly (Schmoker, 2001). Quite recently, whole states such as Virginia and Massachusetts have been startled at the dramatic increases in urban and low-performing schools passing even the most difficult state exams (Seymour, 2001; Greenberger, 2001).

Even more hopeful is that the best and most reliable methods for realizing such improvements are largely *simple and direct*. And they are eminently replicable. The issue is not whether we can expect such gains. We can. The real problem — and it is hard to convey this with enough emphasis — is our tendency to ignore or underestimate the most effective, simple methods in favor of simplistic methods: an overemphasis on a single classroom strategy or on elaborate,

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Up and AWAY

unwieldy, unproven improvement or accreditation schemes.

There is substantial evidence that results are virtually inevitable when teachers, working in teams:

- Focus substantially — though not exclusively — on assessed standards.
- Review simple, readily available achievement data to set a limited number of measurable achievement goals in the lowest-scoring subjects or courses and target specific standards where achievement is low within that course or subject area.
- Work regularly and collectively to design, adapt, and assess instructional strategies *targeted directly at specific standards* of low student performance revealed by the assessment data (e.g. “measurement” in math; “voice” in writing; “sight reading” in music).

Michael Fullan has been saying for years that successful schools are places where teams of teachers meet regularly to focus on student work through assessment and change their instructional practice accordingly to get better results (Fullan, 2000). Note the simplicity here and juxtapose it with Fullan’s uneasiness with “comprehensive planning.” He writes that “complex implementation plans themselves become another source of confusion and burden” causing “fragmentation and overload” (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). Years later, he writes that systemic reform has not added “*one iota of clarity to the confusion faced by the majority of teachers*” (my emphasis) (Fullan, 1994).

RESPOND TO THE RESEARCH

What does this mean for staff developers?

It should mean that they become agents and advocates of simple but effective improvement mechanisms — like those outlined above. For all our grand schemes, our systemic reform, our comprehensive improvement programs, we don’t engage in simple, teacher-driven processes. We have yet to respond to the research and urging from Fullan and other eminent sources that collective, targeted

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teacher expertise is the key to school improvement (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Rosenholtz, 1991; Little, 1987; Sparks, 1998; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999; Haycock, 1998). We have yet to respond to the large and growing number of real schools that demonstrate that these simple practices work (Schmoker, 2001; Barth, Haycock, et al., 1999).

Staff developers can promote and facilitate such exceedingly simple standards-based activities at the ground level. Consider this true story.

A team of teachers began to meet with the goal of increasing the number of students who could write good narratives. They administered their first writing assignment and scored it with a four-point rubric used for the state writing assessment (the use of which is a patently research-based practice; see Hillocks, 1987).

Then they counted the total number of students who had reached the standard — a score of 3 or better — to use as a baseline. They reviewed papers that had not met the standard and did a rough estimate to identify the area where the greatest number of students had difficulty. It was “descriptive settings.” Only three or four of about 90 kids had done these well. The next step was to consult the interpretive guide to the state assessment to see exactly what an effective “descriptive setting” should look like. The teachers then brainstormed better ways to teach “descriptive settings.” In less than a half-hour, they sketched out an effective lesson for addressing this area of weakness and for assessing progress between this meeting and the next, one month later.

The result: At the next meeting, they found that about 85 of those 90 students could now write good “descriptive settings.” In turn, this resulted in almost half of the kids in the “below standard” category moving out and up.

One meeting. Less than 30 minutes. And the strategy was clearly portable; it could now be shared with others in the district, exponentially multiplying the impact of the team’s success.

SEPARATING GOOD FROM GREAT

There is hope for us *if we can see how different this is* from what we typically do in the name of “school improvement planning.” I’ve reviewed hundreds of school and district improvement plans — the clearest, most revealing window into the soul of our current confusion.

What do they reveal? For all the time and good intentions invested in them, these plans themselves prevent — they supplant — processes like those described above. They fragment and complicate the academic mission. We set goals (usually far too many), but they lack a measurable baseline. Many of them aren’t goals at all. They are activities or programs (a crippling confusion in this game). Then, without even consulting the data to *identify and target specific areas of underperformance*, we generate and commit to a long list of action steps — an unfocused grab bag of strategies, many of them popular but unproven — that we will implement. And we have no way of knowing if or how well these actions are being implemented. We consume time and attend meetings and multisession trainings with no plan, between meetings, to assess student performance or to adjust instruction in light of these formative results.

At the end of the year, we submit reports not about which targeted, teacher-invented methods or strategies got results, but about what we implemented, what our committees did, and what we learned.

We could have been developing and refining terrific strategies and whole lessons that teach kids to subtract with

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regrouping, add and subtract positive and negative integers, or synthesize material from several articles into a coherent, persuasive piece.

Quite recently, author James Collins weighed in with his study of 1,435 organizations. What separates the good from the great? Not time-consuming “overhyped” change programs that arrive with each new CEO. It is instead highly focused team efforts conducted with “simplicity and diligence.” This approach works because “real people in real companies want to be part of a winning team. They want to contribute to producing real results. ... When people begin to feel the magic of momentum, when they begin to see tangible results, that’s when they line up, throw their shoulders to the wheel and push” (Collins, 2001).

Best of all, Collins says, we can build such momentum without increasing the number of hours we work.

We have to see that in our world, the world of schools, this momentum eludes us because we don’t focus, unwaveringly, on short- and long-term results in specific areas of underperformance. How often in the typical school do we celebrate, say, a team’s big success in getting almost every kid to translate between fractions, decimals, and percentages? When was the last time we announced and distributed a great (meaning measurably successful) lesson or strategy for ensuring that kids master polynomials or can successfully balance equations in high school chemistry? Why aren’t we regularly celebrating such breakthroughs and creating “the magic of momentum”?

Because instead of focusing on

concrete, short- and long-term results, we focus on implementing high-sounding, time-killing, often feckless strategies or comprehensive plans or programs.

Staff developers need to help clients base improvement efforts on evidence, on what works in real schools. Planners need to know that even the most popular, name brand, whole-school reforms have a shaky record of success — or no record at all. These expensive, time-consuming programs have in fact suffered “a string of setbacks” (Viadero, 2001). Even the key advocates for these so-called “research-driven models” admit that they have had *only the most limited success in actual schools* (Fashiola & Slavin, 1998). One recent study of large school districts found that evidence of effects typically takes a back seat to “personal testimonials, philosophical comfort ... and good marketing by developers” (Corcoran, Fuhrman, & Belcher, 2001).

These programs and their offspring neglect the evidence of simpler but more effective practices. They suffer from the most simple and obvious deficiency: They don’t concentrate on how teams of teachers can improve instruction in areas of lowest performance — often *one at a time* — to reach measurable goals. Because they are “comprehensive,” we never talk about how to teach just one difficult skill. Big programs fail because they typically consume the time and resources that could be creating opportunities for teams of practitioners to develop and refine strategies and lessons targeted toward areas of high student failure and frustration.

I have recently written of the marked success of five whole school districts and a number of individual schools, most of them facing formidable socioeconomic challenges (Schmoker, 2001). The most arresting reason for their exceptional improvement is the simplicity of their efforts — all built around the same themes: setting goals (few in number); using data to identify areas of lowest performance; and then finding, creating, and continuously refining better ways to

teach to those skills using a baseline and measuring the number of students who actually learn the specific targeted skills.

These teachers employ *truly* research-based strategies like Reciprocal Reading (Berliner & Casanova, 1996) or those found in Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock's *Classroom Instruction That Works* (2001). But they don't begin with the strategy. They begin *with the specific standard or standards we want more students to learn*. Then they choose and adapt the appropriate strategy. Being specific does not mean only basic skills, as important as they are. In these schools, teachers have created new lessons and strategies for helping more students learn the elements of comparative social and economic systems, vowel sounds, the concept of light and color in physics, getting the main idea of a text.

And these districts collect and bank these lessons and strategies (Schmoker, 1999). Proven, field-tested lessons are available to other teachers within the system, organized by skill and subject. Staff developers could promote the creation of these invaluable "lesson banks" that constitute a harvest of teachers' practical, collective expertise (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999).

CONCLUSION

In words that resonate with most educators, Peter Drucker (1992) writes that "the largest and easiest gains in knowledge work come from redefining the task and eliminating what need not be done."

Collins writes that we must all make a "stop doing list." We must "*stop doing* anything and everything" that doesn't get us the results we want (Collins, 2001).

Results will require tough but intelligent decisions from us. To gain the results we want will require that we systematically review and eliminate unnecessary, ill-wrought goals and committee work, that we abandon ineffective but so-called "research-based" programs and strategies. Staff developers are uniquely situated to urge educators to conduct such essential reviews.

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And they could also begin immediately to redefine a successful improvement effort as an *effective lesson or strategy that gets results*. These lessons might be part of a larger program or refined lessons that fit within the program. But we need to realize that a focus on lessons themselves — linked to assessed standards — provides our best chance to study and hence improve instruction. Let's begin urging educators everywhere to identify, refine, disseminate, and even publish great lessons. And not just attractive or appealing learning activities, but teacher-proven, teacher-refined lessons and units that can help students master essential standards.

Perhaps the true culmination of a professionalized teaching force would be the "lesson fairs" Stigler & Hiebert write about, paid for with the same staff development funds we now spend on expensive, bloated programs, or on consultants like me.

The evidence for this approach, in real measurable results, is compelling. Collins, like so many others, has found that large-scale success can start when just one team is given the opportunity to "create a pocket of greatness" (Collins, 2001). In our case, one good lesson could start the ball rolling.

What are we waiting for?

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